

IT'S THURSDAY NIGHT IN COLUMBIA, AND YOU'VE GOT NO EXCUSE TO BE BORED. NOT WHEN A JAMES BROWN WANNABE IN A SHINY RED CAPE IS SINGING "MAKE IT FUNKY" AT MAC'S ON MAIN AND A POET NAMED MECCA IS RECITING EYEBROW-RAISING WORK WHILE A JAZZ COMBO PLAYS RESPECTFULLY IN THE BACKGROUND AT THE HUNTER-GATHERER. IT'S ALL ABOUT RESPECT AT THESE VENERABLE NIGHTSPOTS — RESPECT FOR LOCAL SINGERS, POETS AND MUSICIANS WHO DARE TO PERFORM LIVE FOR ENCOURAGING AUDIENCES. IF YOU LIKE JAZZ AND BLUES, THURSDAY IS YOUR NIGHT IN SOUTH CAROLINA'S CAPITAL CITY.



HOT NIGHTS. COOL CITY.

By Aida Rogers

"You heard it. It's infectious," says Mark Rouse, a trumpeter who leads the second set at the Jazzology Workshop at The Hunter-Gatherer. Like Mac's on Main, The Hunter-Gatherer's primary goal is to serve good food. But chances are a different kind of nourishment is what the Thursday night crowds are after. Take Rouse. Though grounded in classical music, he wanted to play more jazz. He found exactly what he needed with Skipp Pearson, a noted saxophonist and former band director who started his "workshop" to give players a chance to learn publicly. Eight years later, Rouse is comfortable taking the helm, and younger performers have moved on to bigger cities to play professionally. The biggest winner? Local jazz lovers who've heard some good sounds without traveling far.

"Some Thursdays in here are magical," says William Dudley Gregorie, a regular patron. "The way the players come together, the music becomes so phenomenal — literally magical. They're so in sync that it's like they've been together for years, but some have never played together."

The camaraderie extends into the audience, where friendly strangers share unvarnished tables to enjoy the music. Many arrive early and make a night of it. The Hunter-Gatherer has an eclectic menu, which matches its roughhewn, university neighborhood interior. Plates of chickpea and black bean hummus make for satisfying appetizers, especially with some of the microbrews. Hash browns, not fries, accompany sandwiches and specials. The generous helping of live jazz creates the perfect dessert.

"For me, it's a release, a chance to express myself," says Rouse, an insurance agent. If the Jazzology Workshops weren't available, he's confident he'd find somewhere to play. "But it wouldn't be as good as this," he adds, explaining that Wycliffe Gordon, a nationally known jazz trombonist, has played here.

"THIS IS THE MECCA IN COLUMBIA FOR THIS KIND OF MUSIC. WE BOW TO SOUTH MAIN EVERY THURSDAY." — MARK ROUSE

While The Hunter-Gatherer serves up jazz behind South Carolina's historic statehouse, Mac's on Main is sending out a powerful signal that blues music resonates decades after it was heard on the Mississippi Delta. Across from Columbia's city hall and the county courthouse, Mac's is just a quick drive from The Hunter-Gatherer. You can visit both in one night, and easily. Then again, if you come to Mac's on Main for supper, you may be too content to move. "Jazz, Blues and BBQ" is the slogan here, and owner Barry "Chef Fatback" Walker makes sure you get plenty to eat. The menu is bona fide southern, with all the regulars represented — barbequed ribs, fried fish and chicken, collard greens, candied yams and macaroni and cheese. Come in, sit down and stay.

On Thursday night, you won't be disappointed. A house band keeps the tunes flowing and provides backup for blues musicians who've come to participate in "Open Mic Blues Jam Night." Some are as seasoned as the food; others are brave people with good voices. One woman can't remember the words to "I Will Always Love You"; one middle-school boy — a local prodigy — plays guitar like Stevie Ray Vaughan. Blues singer-guitarist Jon Bolin likes to introduce his songs by talking about the men who wrote them — Robert Johnson, Taj Mahal, Muddy Waters.

"Thank God we have a Mac's here that offers this style of music," Bolin says. "If people like these guys didn't play it, it would become extinct. I don't want to see anything as fundamental as the blues become nonexistent."

Bolin has traveled around the country, playing the blues in the evenings after working in hospitals during the day. Tired? Hardly. "When the crowd is enjoying it, I can play until the sun rises."

So there's your cue. Try some of Chef Fatback's "world-famous peach cobbler" and tap your foot to the blues. Or sip on a microbrew at The Hunter-Gatherer and catch some jazz. And then — you can do it — get up there and take the microphone. Where music leads, joy will follow.

